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Directorate of Intelligence
Intelligence Memorandum

Office of African and Latin American Analysis

11 May 1994

Cuba: The Rising Specter of Illegal Migration

Summary

Cuban migration to the United States is at its highest level since 1980, when 128,000 fled in the Mariel boatlift:

- More than 1,800 seaborne refugees arrived in Florida between 1 January and 30 April 1994—nearly 200 percent more than during the same period last year.
- Some 140 asylum seekers reached Guantanamo in the first four months of 1994—36 percent more than during the same period in 1993.

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Although Cuba's steep economic decline sparked the escalated migration, it has been fanned by reduced, spasmodic patrolling of the coastline and foreign volunteer efforts to assist those fleeing the island.

Havana is trying to strike a balance between allowing enough migration to provide a release valve for popular frustration, while at the same time preventing an unchecked flow that might threaten the regime's control.

- ***The increase in seaborne arrivals will probably continue to be pronounced, although tightened security around Guantanamo may reduce arrivals there.***
- ***Based on current trends, as many as 10,000 Cubans could request asylum in the United States this year. Over the short term, however, chances for another mass migration along the lines of the 1980 Mariel exodus remain slim.***

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Rising Refugee Rate

The flow of Cuban migrants is at its highest level in years.

- The number who trekked by sea to Florida in the first four months of 1994—1,832—is 194 percent above the same period the previous year; the total of 3,653 seaborne arrivals in 1993 was 56 percent above the 1992 level.

- Some 140 asylum seekers arrived at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in the first trimester of 1994—36 percent more than during the same period in 1993; that year saw 821 migrants reach Guantanamo, the highest yearly total since 1968.

Illegal migration to other Caribbean destinations, while a fraction of the total outflow, has also increased significantly. Last year set a record for defections worldwide of Cuban Government and cultural figures as well. [ ]

Why the Cubans Are Leaving

The continuing, severe economic downturn probably accounts for the sharp increase in illegal departures. Most individuals who left the island were earning a very low wage or were unemployed; many report that they saw no future for themselves or their children in Cuba had they remained. The overwhelming majority avoid citing specific reasons for their decisions to leave the island, stating simply that "things are bad." [ ]

"Political" differences with President Fidel Castro's regime are rarely the decisive factor in a decision to flee. According to a 1994 *Miami Herald* survey of 300 newly arrived Cubans, only 7 percent had ever spent time in jail. Moreover, other such interviews lead us to believe that most of those individuals probably were incarcerated for relatively minor infractions. The few Cubans that Havana terms "counterrevolutionary"—members of dissident or human rights groups, for example—generally wish to stay on the island to promote their cause; when they leave, they almost always are allowed to depart legally. [ ]

Although the country's economic troubles are largely responsible for the current wave of emigration, lax patrolling of Cuba's coastline by the paramilitary Border Guard (TGF)—the result of shortages of fuel and spare parts—has been an additional catalyst. While the random nature of TGF patrols can work as a deterrent to departures, vigilance has been so greatly reduced that it no longer has much of an impact. Most emigres agree that TGF vessels put to sea irregularly and mainly when in possession of specific intelligence that a group is attempting escape. Havana recently admitted that the Border Guard now has no air assets of its own; moreover,

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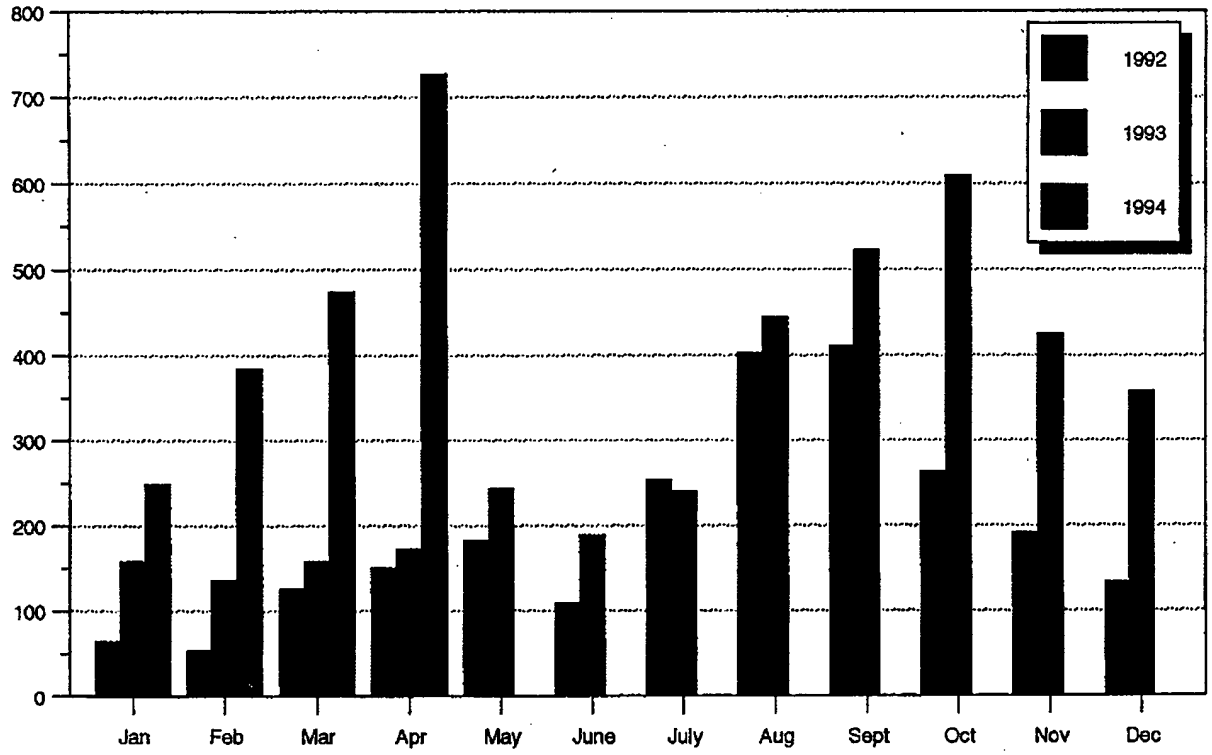
This memorandum was prepared by [ ] Office of African and Latin American Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, [ ] ALA, on [ ]

Cuban Seaborne Migration to Florida



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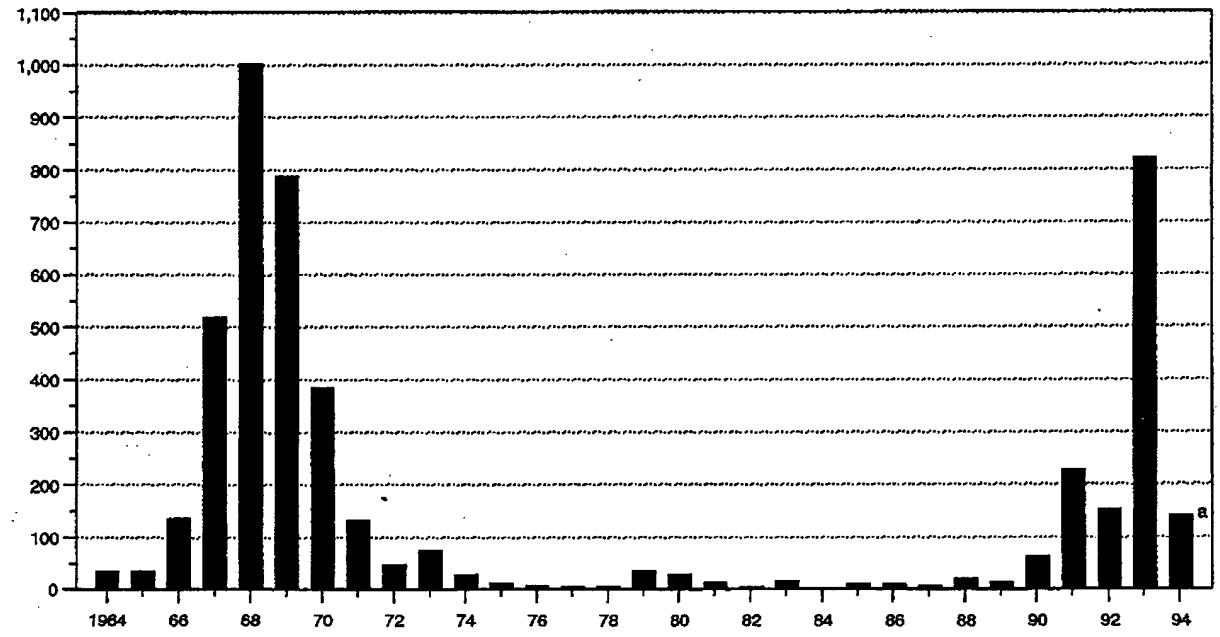
Asylum Seekers Entering USNB Guantanamo Bay



[a] *As of 30 April 1994.*

This chart is

A *Typical* Balsero

adults that illegally flee the island by sea to Florida fit the following profile:

- *More than 75 percent are male; most of these are married but leave their spouses behind.*
- *Roughly 80 to 90 percent of arriving females are married, having departed Cuba with their husbands.*
- *The most common age is mid-to-late 20s; from one-third to two-thirds were born in the 1960s.*
- *A plurality received high school or technical school education; only 5 to 10 percent attended a university.*
- *Most were employed in manual labor or technical fields; between 10 and 35 percent were unemployed when they departed.*
- *More than half depart in groups of between two and 10, in small boats (less than 20 feet) or rafts.*

military air sorties on TGF-style missions are relatively infrequent. Personnel on foot patrols are increasingly apathetic and willing to look the other way in exchange for hard currency bribes.

Stepped-up foreign monitoring and reporting of Cuban migration efforts also deserves considerable credit for boosting the flow, in our opinion. Brothers to the Rescue, a Miami-based humanitarian group founded in 1991, sends pilots aloft over the Straits of Florida in search of Cuban rafters, transmitting their positions to the US Coast Guard (USCG); the group now fields several planes most days of the week. On-island Cubans have heard not only about the group's existence but also that flights often come very close to Cuban territorial waters—a mere 12 miles from shore. We believe that many who attempt illegal departure by sea do so because they think that this volunteer group's efforts have increased their chances for survival in what traditionally has been a very risky undertaking.[1]

[1] We believe that of every 10 Cubans who attempt to depart on rafts or boats, two or three probably are caught by security forces on land or at sea; another two probably die during the voyage. The ratio of those successfully reaching the United States almost certainly has improved, thanks largely to Brothers to the Rescue. They have spotted more groups than the US Coast Guard could on its own with currently allocated assets and have cut down migrants' average time adrift.

word has been spreading rapidly in Cuba—by telephone, US radio broadcasts, and word of mouth—of the increase in the number of Cubans that survive the voyage.

Regime Reaction

Havana is attempting to achieve a balance between allowing illegal migration sufficient to serve as a release valve for popular frustration, while preventing an unbridled expansion that could allow events to spin out of control:

- On the first score, the government has markedly moderated its rhetoric against those deciding to flee. In frank public reviews of the issue, Havana disclosed USCG statistics on the exact number of rafters arriving in the United States, and noted that illegal emigration is a natural and understandable phenomenon throughout the world, and one that Cubans undertake for economic—not political—reasons. This switch from previous characterizations of rafters as counterrevolutionary "worms" is indicative of efforts to allow—and, at times, even tacitly encourage—more disgruntled Cubans to leave the country. Individuals caught in the act of illegal departure—especially if it is the first time—are prosecuted less often than before and generally are given minor reprimands,
- At the same time, the government is clamping down in areas where illegal departures have accelerated, particularly around Guantanamo—where the number of asylum seekers reaching the base escalated more than fourfold from 1992 to 1993, from 152 to 821. To curb the outflow, the government has extended the tightly controlled "Frontier Zone" around the base to an 18-kilometer radius, augmented Frontier Brigade troops with the military's elite Special Troops, more than tripled the police force in Guantanamo City, and increased guard posts and checkpoints in other nearby cities. These measures appear to have had a marked effect. Although arrivals at Guantanamo from January through April 1994 are higher than during the same time frame a year earlier, they generally have totaled less than one-third the level reached during the last months of 1993.

Outlook and Implications for the United States

Economic desperation and Havana's faltering interception capabilities will drive greater numbers of Cubans to attempt to leave the country in increasingly bold and inventive ways.

Regional Reception

Increasing numbers of Cubans are fleeing, at least initially, to nontraditional destinations, especially The Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico.

- *More than 400 Cubans arrived in Nassau in 1993, up from 55 in 1992. Figures for 1994 are even higher; many Cubans transit the country without Bahamian intervention,*

- *Roughly 300 Cubans have escaped to George Town in recent years, inundating the tiny country.*

- *Santo Domingo's migration statistics are weak, but hundreds of Cubans probably transited the country in the 1990s using fake passports and visas or, less often, arriving by ship. More than 100 Cubans who first landed in the Caymans subsequently flew to the Dominican Republic in 1993, hoping to eventually reach Florida.*

- *Mexico City's recent troubles with Cuban migrants date to 1993, when a few boatloads reached the Yucatan. The Mexican Navy rescued two groups of roughly 90 Cubans each in April.*

While steadily increasing, the "rest-of-Caribbean" tally remains a fraction of the total number of Cubans ending up in the United States. Highly publicized landings of Cubans in these countries tend to promote an inflated picture of the extent of migration. Almost all Cubans who leave the island desire to reach the United States; most eventually succeed. Navigation and mechanical failures, as well as poor weather, traditionally account for most of the voyages that stray far from southern Florida. Attempts to make treks shorter, safer, and more assured partially explain more recent stopoffs at Bahamian islands such as Cay Sal—just a few dozen miles from Cuba's shore and only one-third the distance between Havana and Key West.

- Ever larger groups will set out to sea.

- Growing numbers will leave the island with the aid of smugglers—both Cuban and foreign.

- Brazen efforts to secure transportation—including stealing TGF or Navy boats—will increase, raising the chances for violent clashes between emigres and security forces.

- Increasingly creative methods to depart the country will be utilized—examples include windsurfing to Florida and converting a truck-mounted water tank for maritime transport to arrive at Guantanamo.

At current rates, between 6,000 and 10,000 Cubans could arrive in the United States by sea and via Guantanamo in 1994—possibly more than twice last year's figure—with the spike in seaborne arrivals most dramatic. The influx of asylum seekers at Guantanamo may taper off this year—or rise only moderately—if tighter security measures remain in effect. Greater numbers will continue to arrive in other countries throughout the Caribbean.

We nevertheless judge that under current conditions in Cuba the chances for another mass migration along the lines of the 1980 exodus remain slim:

- Such a regime-sponsored mass departure of citizenry could very well exacerbate existing destabilizing trends, something the Castro regime might not be able to survive at this point, given the significant weaknesses brought on by a flailing economy.

However, we cannot rule out the possibility that domestic events in Cuba—such as a belief that the country was close to chaos—might prompt many on the island to decide quickly to undertake a departure by sea. With little notice, those on the northern coast ringing Havana—where 90 percent of all seaborne migrants traditionally hail from—could usurp some 900 small and medium-sized boats and embark with 20,000 to 80,000 people,

[2] In any mass migration scenario, the role of US citizens—who were responsible for transporting the bulk of Cubans to Florida in 1980—would be crucial. If Americans were prevented from aiding the effort, it would significantly limit the number of emigrants; the Cubans have a limited number of boats, and US authorities would probably impound or sink these craft as hazards to navigation, preventing them from making more than one voyage.

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DENNIS HAYS
DIRECTOR OF CUBAN AFFAIRS
BUREAU OF INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS
ROOM 3250
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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